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Luther, Bucer, and the Wittenberg Concordia.

A Study in Irenics.

May 26 of this year will mark the four-hundredth anniversary of the Wittenberg Concordia, an event which is usually not given the prominence which its significance during a critical period of the Reformation really merits. The occasion deserves attention not only on account of the important positions occupied by the chief participants, Luther, Bugenhagen, Melanchthon, Bucer, Capito, and others, but also on account of the significance of the doctrines concerned in the controversy and the far-reaching influence of the *modus operandi* employed by the prominent men engaged in the attempt to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. There is many a lesson in the story of the Wittenberg Concordia, not only in the events themselves, but also in the attendant features, some of which may not be immediately obvious, but can be deduced from the conduct of the colloquents at various times, especially between October 3, 1525, when Brenz explained the Scripture doctrine of the Lord's Supper to Bucer (St. Louis Ed., 17, 1570 ff.), to August, 1538, when the theologians of Strassburg referred to the wholesome effects of Luther's stand in the controverted matters, particularly the Lord's Supper (17, 2162 f.).

Martin Bucer (Butzer), eight years younger than Luther, had been deeply impressed even by the Ninety-five Theses of the Reformer. The next year, as a teacher in Heidelberg, he had occasion to hear the dispute which took place at the convention of the Augustinians and promptly became an adherent of the Reformer's cause. After some vicissitudes, brought about by this adherence, Bucer, in 1523, came to Strassburg, where he had his headquarters for the next twenty-five years, although he did much traveling in connection with his interest in controverted doctrines. From 1549 to 1552 Bucer was active in England, whither he had been invited by Archbishop Cranmer.

The story of the controversy which culminated in the Wittenberg Concordia really goes back to 1525, when Bucer published a Latin translation of Luther's *Church Postil*. In the fourth part of this work he stated his dissent from Luther with regard to the latter's doctrine of the Lord's Supper. Luther's answer was contained in a new introduction to his postil, in which he defended his position with energy and some acerbity. During the first months of the year 1527 Luther wrote and published his controversial treatise *That These Words, "This Is My Body," etc., Still Stand Firm*, in which he makes the statement: "In the same manner he [Bucer] has so mutilated (*also zugerichtet*) the very best book which I ever produced, the postils, which even the papists are pleased with, by introductions,

footnotes, and insertions (*Vorreden, Unterreden und Binreden*), that this blasphemous, infamous doctrine [namely, that of the Zwinglians] is propagated and extended more widely than possibly through all your books." (20, 888 f.) In a letter to Johann Herwagen, dated September 13, 1526, Luther frankly expresses his disapproval of this publisher's venture in having Bucer prepare a Latin translation of Luther's postils. While he acknowledges the merits of the translation as such, he remarks of the unwarranted changes and additions made by Bucer. "But unfortunately he, in the midst of this laudable work and labor (by God's permission) has fallen into that blasphemous abomination of the spirit of the Sacramentarians, and so the splendid gift of eloquence and understanding is contaminated, yea, even corrupted by that harmful poison." (17, 1580.) In Bucer's answer to this letter, dated March 29, 1527, he tries to defend himself, first, by charging that Luther also is subject to error and may well stumble and fall, and secondly, by denying the accusation that he had become guilty of Sacramentarian errors. His defense contains a total of 54 paragraphs. Four days before this, Bucer had also written to Bugenhagen, alleging that his doctrine agreed with that of the Wittenberg theologians. "Concerning the Lord's Supper I have not written differently from what you yourselves have written in Latin. I say in plain words that the believers truly eat the flesh of Christ and drink His blood, but by faith; that this is a physical eating I do not deny, just as you in Latin did not affirm it." (17, 1607.) Evidently the crux of the entire controversy is contained in the last remark, namely, as to the manner of the oral *manducare*. Either Bucer was not altogether clear in his own mind concerning the real presence, or he dreaded the possibility of expressing himself in such a manner as to place himself under the suspicion of favoring Capernaite eating in the Lord's Supper.

The next step in the development of the controversy is offered by the transactions of the disputation held at Berne, January 6—16, 1528. For No. IV of Haller's theses, as submitted there, reads: "That the body and the blood of Christ is received essentially and corporeally (*wesentlich und leiblich*) in the bread of thanksgiving cannot be supported with Biblical Scripture (*mag mit biblischer Schrift nicht beibracht werden*)." (17, 1620.) Even in the earlier part of the discussion Bucer, somewhat needlessly, had remarked: "Luther I have also praised very highly and praise him yet even this day, or rather God the Lord in him, that he has turned us away from men to God. But since he now by divine destiny (in order that the honor which is due to God alone might not be given to him) insists in asserting that, contrary to the unity of the faith, the spiritual words of Christ are to be understood physically and teaches men to seek comfort in the Sacraments; also, that he mingles the true humanity

of Jesus Christ with His divinity, of which we shall treat afterwards, therefore the honor of God compels me, and other Christians with me, that we in this matter withdraw from Luther, just as we are to have faith in God and not in Luther." (17, 1675.) In speaking specifically on Proposition IV on a later day during the convention, Bucer remarked: "I therefore conclude clearly: Since it was God's order that Christ Jesus should not be present with us after His ascension according to His body, He can far less be eaten bodily in the bread. The time when He was with us according to His body and could be handled is long since past; to save us by His Spirit and power He will be with us until the end of the world. And this argument clearly proves that Christ cannot be present bodily in the Sacrament after that He has ascended to heaven." (17, 1827.)*

In view of the position of Bucer, thus emphatically expressed at Berne, it is not surprising that he now openly sided with Zwingli and the other Swiss Reformers. When Philip of Hesse therefore arranged for the Colloquy at Marburg, during the first days of October, 1529, Bucer indeed subscribed to all fourteen points, as written down at the conclusion of the discussion, but this did not settle the controversy regarding the Lord's Supper; for the final paragraph reads: "And although we did not come to an agreement whether the true body and blood of Christ is bodily present in the bread and the wine, yet one part is to show the other part Christian love to the extent that the conscience of every one will permit it, and both parts are to pray diligently to God Almighty that through His Holy Spirit He would confirm the proper understanding." (17, 1943.) It is clear that the contending parties were far from an agreement on this fundamental point, and Luther, as early as October 4, wrote to his friend Nicolaus Gerbel: "Since we defended our position very strongly and the other party yielded many of their points and remained stubborn only in the one article of the Sacrament of the Altar, they were dismissed in peace. This we did lest by hard wringing we should bring forth blood [Prov. 30, 33]. Love and peace we owe even to the enemies. But it was announced to them that, in case they do not see their way clear with respect to this article, they might indeed enjoy our love, but could not be regarded by us as brethren and members of Christ." (17, 1953.) From the various reports concerning the Marburg Colloquy it seems that Bucer tried to effect a compromise, but that he finally sided with the Swiss theologians. For that reason he and his coworkers at Strassburg were not permitted to join the Lutheran theologians at Augsburg, but handed in their own confession, the so-called *Confessio Tetrapolitana*, the cities represented in this document being Strassburg, Memmingen, Constance, and Lindau. In this

* Although the disputation at Berne was held between the Swiss Protestants and the papists, it gives us an insight into Bucer's attitude at that time.

confession chapter XVIII deals with the Eucharist, and it is stated: "*Indeque singulari studio hanc Christi in suos bonitatem semper depredicant, qua is non minus hodie quam in novissima illa coena omnibus, qui inter illius discipulos ex animo nomen dederunt, cum hanc coenam, ut ipse instituit, repetunt, verum suum corpus verumque suum sanguinem, vere edendum et bibendum, in cibum potumque animarum, quo illae in aeternam vitam alantur, dare per sacramentum dignatur, ut iam ipse in illis et illi in ipso vivant et permanent, in die novissimo, in novam et immortalem vitam per ipsum resuscitandi, iuxta sua illa aeternae veritatis verba: 'Accipite et manducate, hoc est corpus meum. Bibite ex eo omnes, hic calix est sanguis meus.'*" (Niemeyer, *Collectio Confessionum*, 760.) These statements, good as far as they went, especially in affirming the Real Presence, were nevertheless not adequate, since they were too much in the nature of a compromise and speak only of the believers as receiving the true body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament. Hence, as Curtis states, the confession was markedly different from that of sound Lutheranism. It seemed that matters had reached a condition of stalemate.

However, Bucer's high estimate of Luther did not permit him to rest. Even while the Diet of Augsburg was still in session, he wrote a letter to Chancellor Brueck, through whom he hoped to approach Melancthon, in which he clearly stated the three points of difference between the Wittenberg and the Swiss theologians, namely, the exposition of the words of institution, the manner of the presence of the body of Christ, and the reception by unbelievers. When this attempt failed, Bucer made a personal call at the Coburg in September, 1530, in order to confer with Luther. But the latter declared, in substance, that both the Swiss theologians and those of Southern Germany would have to give up their opinions before an agreement could be reached. Bucer therefore, the man of "compromises and adjustments," made another attempt to reach Luther by sending him a copy of the Tetrapolitan Confession. Thereupon Luther, on January 22, 1531, wrote Bucer a letter in which he stated: "We thank God that we agree at least to that extent, as you write, as to confess that the body and the blood of Christ are truly present in the Lord's Supper and are offered with the words as a food for the soul. . . . I am surprised that it bothers you to confess freely that it, with the bread, is outwardly offered to the mouth of the pious [believers] as well as of the impious [unbelievers]. . . . From this opinion I cannot recede, and in case you cannot regard it as being demanded by the words of Christ, as you write, yet my conscience regards that this be demanded. Therefore I cannot confess a firm and complete unity with you if I do not want to harm my conscience, yea, if I do not want to sow the seed toward a much greater confusion

of our churches and of a future much more terrible division, if we should establish unity in this manner." (17, 1973 ff.) In order to remain clear in the matter, Luther shortly afterward made a memorandum of the *status controversiae*, giving three points: 1. that Bucer declared his agreement as to the real presence; 2. that Zwingli and Oecolampadius certainly did not share Bucer's views; 3. that the corporeal presence concerns both believers and unbelievers and that both receive the true body and the true blood of Christ orally, under the bread and wine. (17, 1976 ff.)

But Bucer and the other theologians of Southern Germany persisted in their efforts to bring about a reconciliation. On February 1, 1531, Luther found it necessary to address a letter of warning to Duke Ernst of Lueneburg, in which he corrects the impression which Bucer was trying to create, that the entire controversy was a mere dispute about words. "That M. Bucerus alleges that the quarrel is in words only, I should gladly die if it were but so." (17, 2003.) At the same time Luther expressed his hopes that the opponents might finally yield on the points which they were still defending contrary to the truth. In January, 1533, he sent a short treatise to the council and the congregation of the city of Frankfort-on-the-Main, in which he warned most emphatically against Zwinglian doctrine and teachers, who taught that Christ's body and blood were indeed present in the Sacrament, but only spiritually, not corporeally, insisting upon their former error that mere wine and bread are in the Sacrament. So great was Luther's concern about this matter that he even wrote: "If any one knows of his pastor publicly that he holds the Zwinglian doctrine, he should avoid him and rather go without the Sacrament all his life than to receive it from him, yea, even die for it and suffer everything." (17, 2011.)

That there was a good deal of uncertainty and confusion in the minds of many theologians in Southern Germany as late as October, 1533, appears from a treatise of the preachers of Augsburg addressed to the council in which they present the points of agreement and difference between themselves and Luther. While they refer to such difficult points as the sacramental union, the *manducatio oralis*, and the spiritual benefit, they are partly not clear, partly definitely in error, on such points as the use of John 6 as pertaining to the Eucharist, the reception of the true body and blood of Christ by unbelievers, and related questions.

But the fact that Strassburg, at the instigation of Philip of Hesse, had joined the Smalcald League and thereby had accepted the *Augustana*, was bound to have its results even by virtue of the moral effect of the move. Then came the meeting of Melancthon and Bucer in Kassel on December 17, 1534, for which Luther had prepared a written opinion, definitely stating that the controversy could not

be adjusted by alleging that the two parties had not understood each other and insisting that the fact of the Real Presence was fundamental with regard to any adjustment. In other words, he reiterated his position of October 3, 1529: "We hold that also body and blood of Christ are present *substantialiter* and essentially with bread and wine in the Sacrament." Shortly after the meeting at Kassel, Bucer issued an opinion on the Sacrament in which he stressed particularly his refusal to think of a natural union in the Sacrament, as though the body of Christ were actually received by the digestive system of the communicant, but that the sacramental union only be confessed, not, however, in the sense that every one was thereby receiving the food of eternal life as he received the food needed to sustain his mortal life. Since the agreement between Melancthon and Bucer seemed to indicate clearly that the latter believed Christ's body and blood to be present and to be received essentially and really by the communicants, Luther expressed his satisfaction over the progress of the efforts toward unity. In an opinion rendered toward the end of January, 1535, he writes: "In the first place, because it is stated therein that the preachers will and shall teach according to the Apology or Confession, I for my person see no reason for refusing a concordia. In the second place, since they clearly confess that Christ's body and blood are truly and essentially offered, received, and eaten in the bread, etc., — where their heart stands, as the words sound, I at this time would not know how to repudiate their words. In the third place, since this matter from the beginning has torn deep and wide holes, so that among those on our side the belief will hardly find entrance that they mean it as honestly as their words are written, and since there is a strong fear that some of them are still hostile to our name and faith, I regard it as necessary and good that the concordia be not concluded too hastily in order that they may not be hurried and that no discord be aroused among those of our side." (17, 2057 f.)

While Bucer was active among his friends in Southern Germany, Melancthon was doing everything in his power to promote the cause of the proposed concordia in Wittenberg and elsewhere. Johann Brenz for a while had serious misgivings about the entire matter, and it seems that Osiander likewise took a negative attitude, as did Urbanus Rhegius. A letter from the latter, addressed to the preachers of Augsburg, dated July 14, 1535, and one from Justus Jonas to the same addressees, dated July 19, 1535, did much to further the cause of a union in the truth.

The *status controversiae* was by this time known to all concerned; for Luther had pointed out time and again that the Scriptures cannot be understood in any other way than as speaking of the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament, *substantialiter et corporaliter*, and yet not *per transsubstantiationem* or *consubstan-*

tiationem, or *impanationem*, or *subpanationem*, but by virtue of a sacramental union, so that all communicants, both believers and unbelievers, receive His body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine.

Before we conclude our historical sketch, it should be noted that Luther tried to avoid all personal matters in the controversy, while at the same time he insisted with all seriousness on upholding the full truth of the Word of God. In his letters, opinions, and treatises on the question we find expressions such as the following: "Let God be my witness. I would, if that were possible, gladly buy off (*gerne abkaufen*) this dissension with my body and blood (even if I had more than one body)." (17, 2051.) "Therefore I beg you on your part to be persuaded that I desire this concord with such fervor as I desire the Lord Jesus Christ to be evermore gracious to me. And do not doubt that, as much as in me lies, nothing can be demanded of me or can be commanded me which I would not gladly and happily do and suffer. Let us continue, and God, softened by our prayers and fervent pleading, will complete what He has begun, so that it may be a firm and enduring union, without any misgiving or offense. Amen." (17, 2075.) "I now dare firmly to hope that this our concord will be a pure and lasting one. May He complete it who has begun it, namely, God the Father, the God of peace and of concord, for the sake of Jesus Christ, His Son, our Lord!" (17, 2076.) "I want you to believe that you have given me great joy with your zeal for our concordia; if I did not also desire it from my heart, I should not have devoted myself to it in such a measure." (17, 2080.)

Matters having proceeded to this stage, the development took place with a fair degree of rapidity. According to the report of Johann Bernhardi of Frankfort, the South German theologians left Frankfort on May 10, 1536, arriving at Eisenach on May 13, where they waited for Luther for three days. Since he, however, was prevented by the after-effects of a recent illness from making the journey, the company of theologians, consisting of Bucer and Capito of Strassburg, Frecht of Ulm, Otther of Esslingen, Wolfhardt and Musculus of Augsburg, Schuler of Memmingen, Bernhardi of Frankfort, Germani of Fuerfeld, Matthew Alber and Schradius (Schradinus) of Reutlingen, to whom must be added Zwick of Constance, although he was merely an associate at the conference, proceeded to go to Wittenberg. The Swiss theologians did not come in person, but sent best wishes. On May 21 the entire company arrived in Wittenberg together with Melanchthon and Cruciger, who had gone out to meet them, also Myconius and Menius, who had joined their group on the way. Myconius, like Bernhardi, prepared a detailed account of the proceedings, from which the following statements are especially noteworthy: "Luther declared that he desired nothing more than that an honest, steadfast, true union might again be established

among us. . . . His opinion was that it would be better to leave the matter *in statu quo* than to make the whole wrangle, evil and bad as it was, a hundredfold worse by a feigned and colored concordia. And even if we could deceive the world, yet the eyes and ears of the Lord, who hears all things, could not be deceived. . . . Luther repeated with great seriousness, as is his wont, that there should be a true concord or none at all." (17, 2090 ff.)

The discussion reached its climax on May 23, in Luther's home, when Bucer declared that the body and the blood of Christ, the natural, essential body, was received in Holy Communion, not only with the heart, but also with the mouth of those who received it, worthily unto salvation, unworthily unto damnation. After some further discussion Luther and his company withdrew into another room in order to determine whether all were satisfied with the position as stated by Bucer. This having been ascertained, it was decided to inquire once more whether the other colloquents confessed that the very bread which is given to the unworthy (as Paul calls them) by the servant of Christ with the words of Christ, who has instituted it (the Sacrament), was truly the body of Christ. The account of Myconius continues: "Since they now confessed that upon which the matter depended, namely, that the bread is the body of Christ, by the power and might of Christ, who instituted it and therefore has said and promised it by His divine majesty, no matter whether the unworthy abuse it or the worthy use it properly, there is now peace and concord between us who were there assembled." (17, 2098.) This agreement, which became Article I in the resolutions, and other points discussed and accepted, were then embodied in a document called *Formula Concordiae*, or articles of the concordia which were compared, agreed upon, and subsequently subscribed to, by the theologians of both parties. (17, 2087 ff.) The names appearing as subscribers are Capito, Bucer, Frecht, Otther, Wolfart (Wolfhardt), Musculus, Schueler, Bernhardi, German, Alberus, Schradinus, Luther, Jonas, Creutziger, Bugenhagenius, Melancthon, Moenius, and Myconius. Thus the matter was brought to a God-pleasing end.

The concord which had thus been established between Wittenberg and Southern Germany was never disturbed by Luther. As for Bucer, who labored very diligently to have the Wittenberg Concordia accepted in Strassburg and the surrounding country, he could not deny his proclivity for compromises and uncertain adjustments even now. He still tried to bring the Swiss theologians into the agreement as now acknowledged, a procedure which brought him under the suspicion of being insincere or double-tongued. As for Luther, his later letters to Bucer, especially two dated October 14, 1539, show that he had the highest regard for his office and his ability and that he appreciated highly the fact of Bucer's keeping him informed concerning conditions in Strassburg and elsewhere.

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